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**THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN ENGLAND**

by

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The Impact of National Culture on School Leadership in England

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Traditionally, state-maintained schools in England have been run by the headteacher, under the guidance of a building level governing body, and within the strategic control of a democratically elected local authority. The last twenty years have seen radical changes in this balance of power, however, as central government has sought to wrest control of the schools away from the professionals, and from local democracy, in favour of a market place environment in which parents are viewed as the consumers. It is within this climate of increased accountability and responsiveness that we examine the role of the headteacher in this paper. But each headteacher is also an artefact of the nation which has established the social climate in which they operate and has largely shaped their values. So, we also need to take account of the 'English' factor which affects the mores and culture surrounding their work.

Being English is different from being British, although the latter includes the former. Great Britain actually comprises the nation states of England, Scotland and Wales, whilst the United Kingdom also includes Northern Ireland. England is by far the biggest of the four countries, all of which are governed by a single parliament operating out of London, with a population approximately seven times the size of the other three nations put together. Consequently the English and foreigners still speak of Britain and England interchangeably, something the Welsh, Scots and Irish never do.

Richards (1997) conducts an illuminating examination of the British character which, he suggests, was forged from protestantism, empire, war with France, trade and parliamentary democracy. From that background came the sense of duty, the

famous British 'stiff upper lip', individuality and tolerance. These qualities were grafted on to two other distinctly English characteristics. First, the sense of humour, considered a characteristic of the English since at least the Middle Ages. Pope Eugenius III declared in 1140 that the "English nation was fit to be set to anything it would handle and one to be preferred to others were it not for the impediment of levity". The second aspect is that ineffable sense of superiority. The Venetian ambassador reported in 1497: "The English are great lovers of themselves and of everything belonging to them. They think there are no other men like themselves and no other world but England".

The archetypal English character is probably fixed in time at the turn of the last century, the Victorian era, but has continued to be shaped by popular culture throughout the 20th Century. Epic films such as "The Four Feathers" celebrated an upper class officer caste, dedicated to service, self-sacrifice and emotional restraint - characteristics that you can see today in the heir to the throne. The working class comedies of the same period depicted the decency of making the best of things, overcoming all odds with a smile and a song and winning through by hard work and good humour. These legends have been further perpetuated by the myths surrounding the sinking of the Titanic where the captain reputedly calls on those due to drown to be 'British' and the band plays 'Nearer my God to me' as the ship slowly disappears into the depths of the icy sea.

More recently, however, we have seen an increased growth of individualism, the winding up of the empire and Protestantism in terminal decline. Local democracy was repeatedly attacked by successive Conservative governments through legislation designed to transfer responsibility and power for public services to the consumers. Schools were not exempt from this shift in social responsibility and have virtually become free standing organizations. Headteachers in England operate in a climate that reflects all of that history.

OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

Despite a huge raft of legislation since 1979 when the Conservatives came to power, the 1944 Education Act still provides the basic framework for schools in England. Under the terms of that act of parliament children of compulsory school age must receive efficient full-time education suitable to age, ability and aptitude. It is important to recognise that for children between the ages of five and sixteen years it is education which is compulsory, *not* school attendance. In practice, most parents fulfil their obligations by sending their child to school, but home education is an option.

There are two main categories of school: *independent schools* and *state-maintained schools*. All schools are subject to some legal requirements but the majority of education law applies only to the state sector. The State system of education is controlled by Parliament and administered by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) under the direction of the Secretary of State for Education.

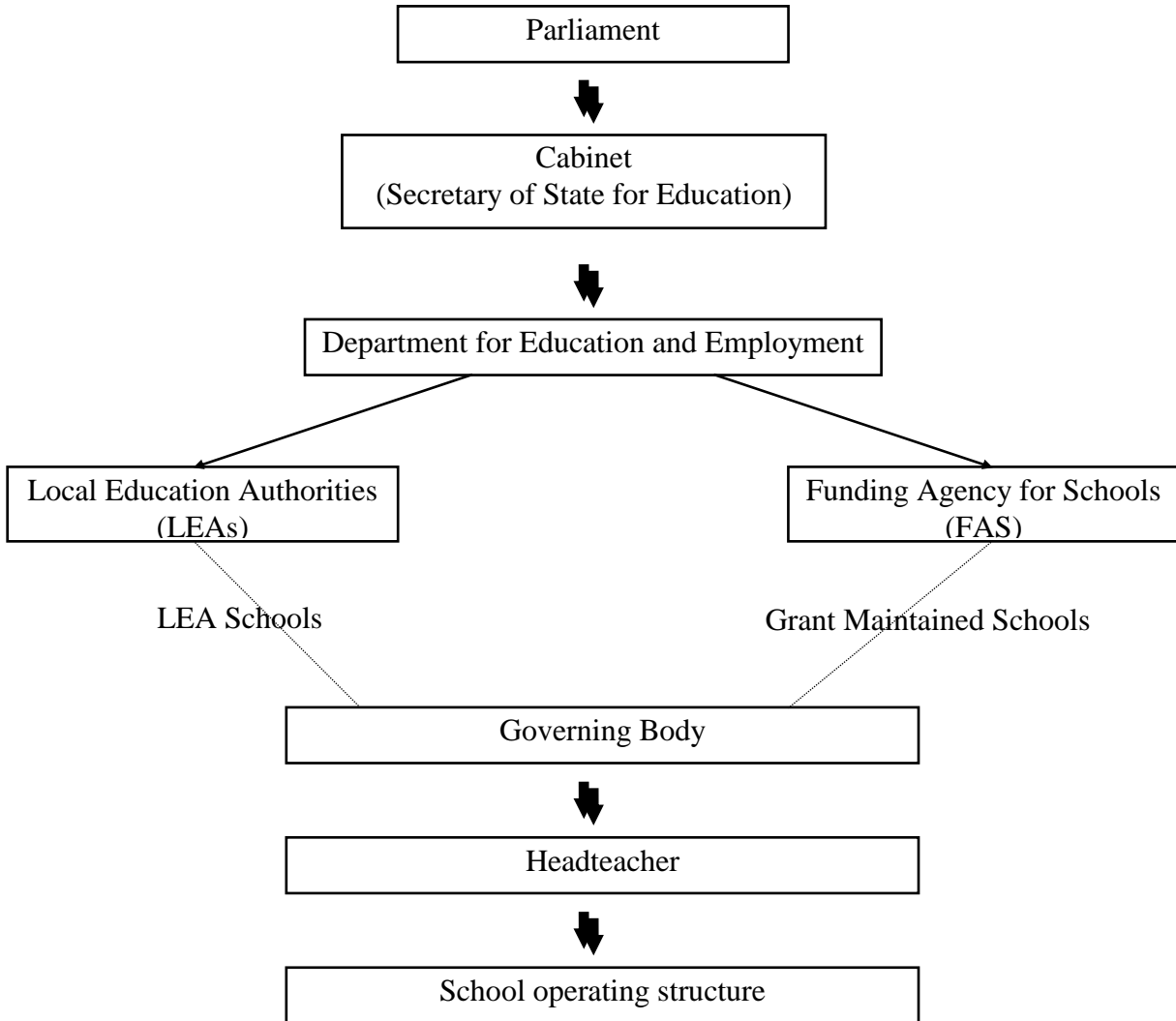
Education is largely provided through democratically elected local authorities. Each local authority is run by a locally elected borough or county council which provide a range of services including planning, social services and education. The Local Education Authority (LEA) is the elected council which runs the education service by employing a staff of education officers and is responsible for ensuring that sufficient school places exist for all children of compulsory age. Following a recent re-organization there are now some 130 LEAs in England.

Perhaps as a result of the looseness of wording within the 1944 Act there are now a myriad array of state-maintained schools, differently classified and catering for different age groups. In some instances these differences, such as church schools, are the product of major pressure groups. In other instances, such as where the age of transfer between stages of schooling is different, this may be due

to local decision-making. The commonality between all state-maintained schools in England is that they operate under a tri-partite education system and are thus categorised as 'Primary' or 'Secondary'. The most common age of transfer to secondary schooling is at eleven years of age.

Under the terms of the 1988 Education Reform Act schools were allowed to 'opt out' of LEA control and achieve Grant Maintained status (GM schools). The Funding Agency for Schools (FAS) was established to administer the funding of these schools and to participate in or take control of local planning of education when sufficient quantities of children were being educated in the GM sector. About 1000 of the nation's 30,000 maintained schools opted out of LEA control. In some areas where more than 10 per cent of children were being educated in GM schools this has led to LEAs having to work in concert with FAS and in other areas, where there were more than 75 per cent of pupils in GM schools, FAS taking control from the LEA.

THE CONTROL OF SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND



The remaining state-maintained schools were also given greater responsibility and freedom from the LEA by the same 1988 legislation which saw the introduction of the Local Management of Schools (LMS). The essential component of this approach was to transfer the responsibility for the vast bulk of school funding to the building level. Currently each school is to receive a minimum of 90 per cent of all its potential, student-related, budget as a direct grant. The responsible body for each school is the governing body which comprises up to 19 people (depending on the size of the school). Under the legislation governors are the decision-makers at

the building level, with the headteacher simultaneously acting in advisory and executive capacities. Together they are responsible and accountable for the administration of the funds which include all staff and internal building costs. School building maintenance and other capital expenditure remain the responsibility of the LEA who must also monitor the school's expenditure in order to ensure that money is being spent within the terms of agreed delegation.

Headteachers are responsible for the day to day running of the schools. The headship position in England has undergone radical change over the last decade as a result of the 1988 Act and subsequent legislation, which together with other government initiatives, have forced schools into a market place environment and dramatically increased accountability at the school level. Although this government drive to the atomisation of the education service was designed to increase parent power, particularly through the transference of power to individual school governing bodies, the reality has been to increase the responsibility of the headteacher whose job has been transformed toward the "Chief Executive" rather than "Leading Professional" end of the continuum of role description offered by Hughes (1975).

PREPARATION FOR HEADSHIP

There has not been a corresponding central government initiative for improving the management and leadership skills of headteachers and other senior professionals, however, with the result that most in post at the time of the transition to school based management had to learn 'on the job'. The history of management development for educationalists in England has been a series of disjointed and insubstantial attempts (Male, 1997) since the early 1980s. First attempts to provide support encompassed the establishment in 1983 of the National Development Centre for school management training (NDC) which developed training packages of either one school term or twenty days duration for headteachers and other senior managers. By the end of the decade, however,

only 11 per cent of the target population had been through such development opportunities (Creissen and Ellison, 1996) with the result that in 1990 the government initiated an investigation into alternative approaches through the School Management Task Force (SMTF). In its short life the SMTF undertook a national audit of school leaders, commissioned a number of key research projects and published a valuable and informative report which identified a range of key principles for management development. Funding in support of these proposals did not follow, however, except in the form of a general grant for professional development which was also to cover a great many other central government determined initiatives. At the end of its two year investigation the SMTF was commissioned to oversee the Headteacher Mentoring Scheme, a new initiative designed to assist newly appointed headteachers into post through the provision of a trained mentor, an experienced headteacher. Despite many valuable lessons (Bolam, McMahon, Pocklington and Weindling, 1993) this scheme folded after just one year due to a lack of specific funds.

The net result of this in terms of preparation for headship has been for the majority of prospective candidates to secure their own development opportunities, generally through school based experience supplemented by attendance at various formal training programs, including degree courses. By no means has there been any consistency across the nation and the sole determinant of headteacher role has been the hiring body which, since 1988, has been the governing body in all schools. Commonly, therefore, we can expect current candidates for headship to exhibit a portfolio of experience in senior management positions in one or more schools together with evidence of continuing education, usually in university courses in educational management and administration. It is from this type of background we will find all of the respondents in this study, for even though the new Labour government has announced that all future candidates for headship must have undertaken a newly devised mandatory qualification, we are still a long way from seeing the first 'graduates' from that program.

METHODOLOGY

In all four subjects, two men and two women, were studied for this phase of the study. All were serving headteachers in English co-educational secondary schools in and around the Greater London area and had been in post at least five years. Each respondent could be considered to be a member of the dominant ethnic group in that they were white, British subjects of European descent. Their ages ranged from 46 to 59 years, with an average age of 51. All were in their first headship. The shortest period of service in post was five years, with the longest serving having completed 11 years, giving an average tenure of 7.5 years. Neither of the two women headteachers were married, with being one single and the other divorced, whilst both men were married. All had followed the 'traditional' route to headship in that after beginning work as a teacher they had subsequently served in a number of middle and senior management positions in a variety of schools before applying for the headteacher position. The average length of professional service was 28 years, with a range from 24 to 36 years.

The respondents were selected on the basis of their matching the profile specified for the whole study. In all five potential subjects were formally approached, with one declining due to pressure of work. The remaining four were each sent a standard letter explaining the purpose of the study and the methods of data collection. Subsequently face to face interviews were conducted lasting between an hour and an hour and a half with respondents in their own school. In three instances time constraints prevented the completion of the questions. Separate follow up sessions were agreed where the interviews were subsequently completed. The interviews were tape recorded, with full transcripts being returned to the interviewees in order to check for accuracy. Three of the study group took advantage of this to make minor corrections and small changes to texts for the sake of clarity. Each headteacher was then shadowed for a full working day by the

researcher who made contemporaneous notes of their actions and interchanges with others.

THE SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

The schools varied in size from the smallest student population of 392 to the largest of 950. Two of the schools, coincidentally those run by the two women respondents, included a 'sixth form' i.e. students in the 16 to 18 year age category who are beyond the compulsory school age. Surprisingly these two schools were the smallest in the study. The first, a non-denominational comprehensive school in an outer London borough (School A), struggled to be viable on numbers fewer than 400 and was only really kept alive by the additional resources it received through being a Grant Maintained school. Even with additional funding from the Funding Agency for Schools equivalent to four full-time staff, the complement of 25 staff is really too small to carry the requirements of the full National Curriculum and provide an adequate choice of 'A' levels for the post-16 student body without extraordinary efforts from the teaching staff. It is within this school that we found the busiest teaching head with six hours scheduled teaching a week, plus substitute lessons on a regular basis. The school almost exclusively services a small predominately white working class village community which, by an accident of geography, is fairly isolated from the rest of the borough. This provides another pressure on the schooling system to keep it open despite its small numbers.

School B is a Church of England comprehensive school, located in a mainly urban area that is seen as a dormitory town for London. Situated some 30 miles from the city, it has the reputation of being an area of some wealth. The reality, especially in the local community adjacent to the school, is different with pockets of high unemployment and low income families. The student population fluctuates alarmingly from year to year and stands at some 650 during this year. There is an interesting mix of students with some 15 per cent bussed in from rural areas and about 8 per cent from ethnic origins other than White British. Mainly these are

Asian children [Indian sub-continent] and a few Japanese because of certain employment patterns in the town.

School C was the largest of the school studied, with 950 pupils on roll. Situated in an outer London borough, this non-denominational comprehensive school catered for students aged 12 to 16 years (Years 8 to 11 of compulsory schooling) and exhibited the largest spread of ethnicities. Possibly because of its proximity to Heathrow, London's main airport, it was taking in considerable numbers of refugee children from war zones such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East. The demographics of the area had substantially changed in recent years from mainly elderly people to become much more multicultural, with English as an additional language in the majority of student homes. In the previous academic year only 42 per cent of the school population were white, with the remainder being a mixture with 21 per cent from the Indian sub-continent and 3 per cent Pakistani. The headteacher was certain that this proportion of non-white children was still rising and felt that the changes to the nature of the locality meant it was more reminiscent of an inner-city school than one in the leafy outer suburbs. Through a quirk of planning circumstances¹ the school was consistently under-subscribed and was thus required to take more than a fair share of students who were either admitted to the local school system after the age of 12 years, or were permanently excluded from other schools.

Conversely, School D was 'full' in comparison to its standard intake number and had 915 students aged 11 to 16 years. This situation was in contrast to the one inherited by the present head seven years previously when numbers had fallen to around 500 and there were real question marks over its viability. The feeling of

¹ Several years previously the LEA had to substantially increase its range of secondary provision but, due to lack of building space, was limited in option to expanding existing schools. It 'required' the school to raise its income numbers to 260 per year - way in excess of natural recruitment patterns - or threatened to withhold the funding earmarked for the modernisation of the science laboratories. Ironically, this was the building program

success engendered by this buoyancy had been heightened by a recent inspection, conducted by the Office for Standards in Education, which declared the school to be “good with some excellent features”, praise which was further enhanced by the naming of the school by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector in his annual report as one of the outstanding school nationally. Whilst recognising that cynics would put this ‘success’ down to the location of the school, ostensibly within a high income area known as the ‘Stockbroker Belt’, the headteacher was at pains to point out that the majority of students in the school came from local housing estates which had only average or low incomes. The school served seven local housing estates, only one of which could be deemed to be ‘stockbroker’. Of the others, one is set aside for housing for vulnerable families and one of the school’s key feeder schools is the most deprived in this county which borders Greater London. This was very much a single ethnicity area, however, with only four children having English as an additional language.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH AUTHORITY

Identifying the ‘boss’

Headteachers in England sit in an uneasy juxtaposition between their local planning unit, which is their employer, and their building level governing body. These anomalies of local democracy, caused by recent national legislation, mean that the respondents in this study were unclear as to who was their ‘boss’. This did not mean that they were unsure, for each respondent in this study demonstrated a keen awareness of the reality of power distribution within their respective education systems and their levels of accountability - rather it meant that the locus of power shifted, according to circumstance and local conditions, between their funding agency and the school’s governing body. The legislation is quite clear in that the governing body is the responsible and accountable unit for the school and identifies the headteacher as being responsible for day to day issues within that

that the school took advantage of to overspend its budget the following year - see section on “Relationships with authority”.

relationship. The funding agency, be it an LEA or the FAS according to the status of the school, is the headteacher's employer, however. The general consensus of these respondents was that the funding agency held sway in most matters which, in the case of the LEA schools, was the Director of Education. The role of the governing body was seen as supportive rather than supervisory in nature, although due recognition and deference was accorded to governors by the headteachers in this study.

The respondents were conscious of the exposure in their professional capacity caused by the changes in legislation over the last decade and acceded that, in these instances, they were fortunate in having governors who did not see it as their role to engage in micro management. This is not always the case in English schools as the Head of School C indicated when quoting statistics compiled by his professional association which showed a very high number of headteachers taking early retirement as a consequence of poor relationships with their governing bodies. The reality of the law is as he says, that "in theory they have a lot of power". Indeed there have been several high profile cases where disagreements between governors and headteachers have escalated out of control and, because of the bias of the legislation towards the local consumers, into almost intractable solutions. The word which kept coming up in this study, however, to describe the relationship between headteacher and governors was "partnership".

There was considerable evidence exhibited by the respondents of high levels of self-confidence in the fulfilment of their role, particularly in dealing with their respective funding agencies. The headteachers of Schools C and D both described conflicts with the LEA over expenditure which demonstrated their ability to successfully engage in brinkmanship. In one case the school withheld a £20k payment to the LEA in a dispute over building maintenance, whilst the other school knowingly overspent its budget allocation (in direct contravention of the legislative rules on delegated budget) in order to benefit from a discount on offer for further

work from the building company who were carrying out approved works on behalf of the LEA. In neither case was the headteacher fazed by the 'wrath' that fell about their ears from the Director of Education and in both instances they enjoyed the full support of their governors.

With the exception of some school based personnel issues, all the respondents saw their major problems emanating from the external environment. Largely these were to do with national rather than local issues, most commonly the lack of resources and mandates on curriculum and/or school processes. The issue of balancing what they often perceived to be an inadequate school budget was a major concern for all respondents, a situation exacerbated in the smaller schools where under recruitment caused extreme difficulty with what is a student related allocation. Unlike any other organization, virtually all public sector institutions in the UK cannot carry forward any overspend on an annual budget which must be set to achieve a balance. This, it was felt, led to inordinate amounts of bureaucracy and accountability which detracted from their desire to focus on the creation of the most effective learning environments. At the time of the interviews respondents were already aware of further anticipated cuts in the next year's budget, a situation which was unlikely to change even though the new Labour government was pumping £1bn of funding into the education service over the course of its five year term that was additional to spending predictions. The respondents felt the amount was still too little to make a real difference to the lack of investment into the education infrastructure over the course of the previous 18 years of Conservative governments. Consequently national initiatives, such the ambition to create a national learning grid based on state of the art information and communications technology, were seen as the rhetoric of naïve politicians.

National mandates on the curriculum, or on school processes, were met with a world weariness by these headteachers who perceived themselves as constantly

trying to deflect some of the heightened focus of teacher accountability that has been a feature of recent years. As one respondent put it:

I see my job as keeping up the morale of teachers and every time a politician goes on about failing teachers and third rate schools and criticising schools for every issue under the sun that effects my job. I'm surprised at how high the morale of the teachers is here actually, but I think that teachers have been blamed for virtually everything - drugs, crime, England not winning the World Cup ... you name it, teachers have been responsible for it. And teachers may shrug it off but I think the accumulative effect being hammered all the time is something that must affect everybody in schools.

The agenda of school inspections, league tables of schools based on raw examination results, new programs of study within the National Curriculum and other, often ill-informed or badly conceived new initiatives have taken a toll of the teaching force, a situation that has manifested itself with increased numbers leaving the service. This, rather, than dealing with under-performing staff, was seen as the major problem for all headteachers involved in this study.

Under-performing teachers

Three of the headteachers in this study were, nevertheless, actively addressing the issue of under-performing teachers in their school, although none had yet felt the need to go into capability procedures. Labor laws, the notion of teacher tenure and a tradition of teacher autonomy in the classroom had tended to militate against success in this aspect of human resource management in education. Put bluntly, it is almost impossible to terminate a teacher's contract unless they are proven guilty of illegal activities that relate to their post or it can be demonstrated that they are incompetent. The latter requires a formal process which involves the aforementioned capability procedures. The pressures for schools to 'perform' and to be efficient, artefacts of the current social fabric, means that it is no longer possible to sustain teachers in post who are under-performing. Consequently

performance levels that might have gone unnoticed or, worse still, had been tolerated in the past, were now being confronted.

Two of the schools in the study, for example, had identified from the public examination results significantly different levels of student performance between departments that could not be explained by any other factor, hence giving rise to the conclusion that the teachers were not working hard enough with the students. The first reaction, in both instances, was to explore the facts with the teachers concerned in a non-threatening or aggressive way, but in a manner that left them in no doubt that they were expected to improve their performance. In one of these cases, this investigation was beginning to demonstrate that lack of effective leadership by the Head of Department was the key factor and, after initial fruitless discussion, the headteacher had commissioned an inspection report from an external curriculum consultant. At the time of the first research interview the Head of Department was challenging the findings and conclusions of this report. Thus we can see the potential difficulties facing the headteacher who was seeking an early solution to this problem in favour of the children. She was quite resolute, however, in her aspiration to remove him from the Head of Department role in time for the next academic year and was systematically building a 'case' against him whilst really hoping that the incumbent would jump before he was pushed.

This approach appears to be a typical strategy from what we can see in the evidence collected in this study. Headteachers firstly seek to expose the notion of under-performance to those teachers who they feel to be responsible for those outcomes in the hope that they will respond positively and improve their performance. This was clearly evident in the whole department issues illustrated above, but was also evident in the two individual cases that were also being dealt with separately. One of these, a teacher in a shortage subject area (i.e. where the labor market was sparse), seemed impervious to this knowledge or, at least, unmoved by it. In that instance the headteacher concerned had subsequently

provided additional support to the teacher in order to allow space for the development of better planning and teaching materials, but had also increased the pressure by requiring evidence of sound planning. This strategy of mixing pressure and support was reflected in other instances with the pressure mounting as time went on. In another of the four schools, for example, the Head of Department in a core curriculum area had responded aggressively to initial overtures to improve. This, in turn, had led to increasing pressure being directed toward her by the headteacher until she 'got the message'. By the end of the data collection period she had resigned her position as Head of Department and accepted another role in the school which was less central to the delivery of the curriculum.

This 'game playing', as Senge (1990: 274) describes it, is seen as essential by headteachers in England who recognise the 'futility' of enacting formal procedures against under-performing staff. Such are the pitfalls in that process, engendered by labor laws that were created in an age of individual libertarianism, that it can be likened to a game of Chutes and Ladders - just when you get to square 90, you land on a chute and go back to square 1. In other words, if you get the capability procedures procedurally wrong you have to go back to the point where you originally started in the relationship. Worse still, if you start over you then run the risk of being labelled as vindictive or mendacious. Only one of the headteachers interviewed had ever pushed all the way along the formal route of capability procedures and, whilst she had been successful, she was also happy to concede that the process demanded a close attention to detail and a doggedness that demanded a high level of devotion to task. Hence in the first case we described above, the under-performing Head of Department, a range of strategies had been employed in the effort to enhance his performance, including the hiring of a bright, sparky and go-ahead deputy. Sadly for the headteacher concerned, however, the go-ahead deputy quickly had enough and went ahead to another school! But her program of support and pressure continued and she, too was able to report before

the end of the data collection period that the incumbent was willing to stand down by the time the new academic year started.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

The respect for individuals described in the previous section, albeit in that instance set against an alternate pattern of quasi legal activity, underpins the favoured approach of the respondents to conducting relationships with others. All the headteachers in this study felt themselves to be consultative in their decision making style, although two of them wanted to further define the description to include the notion of democracy. Indeed much emphasis was placed on their concern to involve as many people as possible, including students, in determining policy and agreeing subsequent action. It was common, for example, to find a range of scheduled staff meetings and task groups working to define whole school policy and strategy and to find a functioning Student Council which acted as a forum for student concerns.

This style of decision making was felt to be the one common to most of the headteachers in England, although it was pointed out that this was perhaps an evolutionary effect as the previous generation of school leaders were remembered as much more autocratic. This evolution, it could be argued, was a contemporaneous effect of self-managing schools where responsibility had to be shared between senior staff at the very least. Similarly, administrators from the local authority, or funding agency, were deemed to be largely consultative in their approach, again a culture shift that was more evident since the 1988 Education Reform Act. The major consequence of the relocation of power from the centre to the periphery, which was the driving force for the legislation, had been to force LEAs to become a service provider to schools rather than a control mechanism. This, in some instances, results in overkill whereby every proposal from the LEA is put out to consultation. This, in turn, can become yet another piece of time consuming bureaucracy for school management teams.

All respondents indicated that they were open in their relationships to professional colleagues, parents and students whilst also mentioning that, in their experience, few of those groups were hesitant to come forward if they felt the need. There is, of course, the danger of being responsive to those with demands at the expense of those who are more withdrawn. This, they felt, was answered through the provision of various forums and means of communication which allowed all stakeholder groups to be heard, at least through their representatives. Teachers, for example, not only had open discussion meetings but also had union representation. Parents, on the other hand, were generally given access either through the planned parent-teacher conferences or through an open door policy. The headteacher of School C, for example, always remained late into the evening one weekday night in order to be available to parents on a 'drop-in' basis. Observations made during the days when the subjects were shadowed provided evidence that headteachers were responsive to parental concerns and issues, certainly taking them extremely seriously and usually responding immediately. One common strategy was for the headteachers to be visible at the entrance to the school grounds at the end of the day, not only to provide security for students, but also to counter the effect of the 'Gate Mafia' that is a feature of most English schools. (The Gate Mafia is a phrase used to describe those who are always present at the school entrance and are usually the source of most rumour.)

DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND CONFLICT

Problems and stress

The preferred style of the respondents in dealing with uncertainty and conflict was very much in keeping with that described above. In other words they consulted and took advice from a range of sources. Most commonly problems were talked through with senior colleagues or thrashed out in concert with the entire senior management team. The two women both indicated that they often took problems home with them and either talked the issues through with their partner or with a

family member or, alternatively, to ponder more deeply on the issue - even to sleep on it. An example of this could be seen with the headteacher of School B who, on hearing that one of the Heads of Department was leaving mid-term to take up a post at another school, requested thinking time from the Chair of her Governing Body before determining her choice of action. Apart from a natural reticence to take instant solutions that may turn into further problems in the future, one main reason for delay in this instance was that she may now be in a position to undertake a re-shuffle of her existing staff in order to not only provide cover to the end of the year, but also to make a saving on the staff salary bill. This latter possibility also brought with it the potential to permanently promote an existing member of staff and to back fill the vacancy with a younger, and therefore less expensive, member of staff. In fairness to her, it is important to point out that she saw the potential saving as something of an unexpected bonus and was not prepared to take the decision to save money at the expense of the quality of student learning.

This preparedness to take time over decisions was a common feature among the respondents and these claims were borne out during the observations undertaken by the researcher. Most probably this approach was a sign of their experience and wisdom - certainly they were not prepared to rush into decisions and spent a good deal of time both ruminating and taking advice and information. In this way they perceived themselves as providing room for optimal decision making, in that they consulted widely and were thus in the best position to create an effective long term solution.

This is not to say that they were in any way intimidated by their need to make decisions or by the power of their office. Indeed their responses to the interview questions and their demeanour under observation showed them to be extremely capable and competent people - very rarely troubled or ruffled by changes to their routine. A wide personal experience of secondary school management from the

author shows this approach to be typical of headteachers in this phase of education, perhaps best illustrated by the following anecdote. The story is one of a woman headteacher who was involved in a road traffic accident involving herself and a foreign driver on the freeway. Without warning the foreign driver, clearly not used to driving on the left, pulled his car into the path of the headteacher who was going much faster. The initial collision sent her spinning into the central crash barrier, only to ricochet back across all three lanes of traffic before coming to a juddering halt at the side of the road. In the aftermath whilst all around her were losing their heads, she remained calm and coherent. Unable to stand the situation any longer, one of the witnesses said "I don't understand - why aren't you freaked out?" to which she replied: "it's because I have been a secondary headteacher for nine years and this nothing in comparison ...".

It's a tale that says a lot about the pressures of headship and also accounts for the ability of the respondents to remain calm, even dignified, under pressure. All the headteachers in our study were happy to reveal, however, that inside they felt the pressure, even the stress. The analogy of the swan - serene and beautiful on the surface, paddling like mad underneath - appealed to them as one that matched their experience. One respondent admitted to insomnia, worrying over school based issues through the night, mainly because she was dealing with issues that would affect, perhaps permanently, individual student's lives on a day to day basis. Two more suggested that the ability to cope with the pressures increased with experience, but they nevertheless still felt the odd ripple of fear.

School rules

There was an almost uniform response to the question about the sanctity of school rules, in that rules were guidelines to behaviour rather than lines drawn in the sand. In two of the schools studied they had addressed this issue directly by devising a code of conduct in place of a list of rules. Another of the schools had published a list of student rights and responsibilities which provided the framework

for behaviour. All of the respondents indicated their willingness to be flexible according to circumstance whilst not being prepared to lower standards. It was indicative that in all instances the framework for behaviour, whether expressed as a code or as rule, had been drawn up in consultation with the student body and was under constant review. Again, observation of the school in operation, reinforced the opinions that discipline was enforced by the headteachers, but in an assertive rather than aggressive manner. Students clearly knew the difference between right and wrong and the disciplinary issues witnessed were dealt with firmly, but fairly. There was evidence of an even handed approach and no sign of these headteachers being intimidated by aggressive (or ultra defensive) students or their parents.

Teachers and loyalty

All respondents were personally committed to the success of the school and expected loyalty from the teachers to the school, but were not so anxious to see evidence of personal loyalty to themselves. Rather, it was viewed as an issue of teacher professionalism with headteachers expecting, even implicitly demanding, that teachers were seen to be supportive of the school and acting with high moral purpose.

This lack of concern for loyalty to themselves, even as the symbolic leader, is perhaps an attribute of the national psyche. In England it is seen as important not to place too much importance on one's self. This attitude, coupled with a media that delights in building up individuals before bringing them crashing down, often leads to inordinate amounts of self-deprecation. One of the subjects, for example, told the story of how he deflected praise from a senior local politician three times in quick succession, much to the chagrin of his watching partner who was immensely proud of his achievements. So it was common to find the headteachers saying how 'lucky' they were or how good the team that they had gathered around them

was. Anything, it seems, rather than to publicly claim responsibility and credit for success.

Any problems with teachers generally seemed to be resolved with good will at best and by strong will at worst. As described above, headteachers, as a general rule, are not easily intimidated and they seemed more than adequately equipped to deal with any teacher based issue. These ranged from disquiet being exhibited by teachers on the one hand through to major legal issues including labor disputes and even cases of child sexual abuse. The open door policy was a common response for teachers with concerns over school policy or operational decisions, but the respondents were also well used to handling themselves in more formal situations such as disciplinary procedures or union negotiations. Generally, professional and legal advice is available to headteachers through their own professional associations or through service agreements with their local authority. The overall observation is that the experience of site based management appears to have made them extremely competent in such issues as well as increasing their allegiance to a cautious and careful approach to the management of fellow professionals.

FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

The two men in the study did not see their gender as an issue, nor did they perceive themselves to behave differently in their leadership role toward men or women. Both made use of the word 'professional' to describe the manner in which they managed the relationship between themselves and other staff. There was evidence of local conditions effecting the behaviour of those in School D, however, with significant parts of the community feeling the need to refer to the incumbent as the *Headmaster*. This gender allocation by the community, perhaps an example of endemic societal sexism, brought with it the expectation of certain behaviour patterns. The respondent was quick to say that he railed against those expectations and sought to operate in an even handed manner. Apart from the

use of some words and phrases which might be deemed not politically correct in more liberal parts of English society, there was no evidence to suggest he was doing other than he claimed.

There was a significantly different response to this issue from the two women, with the head of School B describing a number of examples where her gender made a real difference to her job. Headteachers within the same school district usually join themselves into a local association which not only deals with both professional issues, but also tends to have a social side. She was only the seventh woman to become head of a secondary school in the LEA when she first joined and found herself in male dominated group, where the women were outnumbered something like eight to one. Amongst her early experiences was the annual dinner when the men began to sing the type of bawdy songs usually associated with all male environments, such as fraternity houses. The decision by the women to walk out of the dinner caused an animated debate that lasted well into the night between men who thought that they had offended 'ladies' and the women who felt that they were not offended, but thought it a stupid way to behave. The strong male culture of this LEA has now broken down substantially as 13 men have left their post in the last four years and, in 12 instances, have been replaced by women - not as part of a deliberate policy, but more because the quality of woman candidates has been better. Nevertheless she was still able to report of depressingly similar circumstances to those experienced on her induction in a different region of the country where, as a guest speaker at a conference for secondary headteachers, her credentials for the position as head of a school were questioned by an almost exclusively male audience. Her major concern was summed up as a fear for the children seeing this type of behaviour as a role model:

I worry when the children are sitting in front of these people during assembly. I worry about that as a role model, because we are that to our staff and to our children in particular. I shall continue to be who I am and must demonstrate to these people that I am a female manager, that I am

actually quite a nice person and that I'm not strange or different. So I do pity them. Most of all I fear for their children. I just think its rather sad that the next generation of children will have some very strange ideas if that's what they see every morning in assembly.

The feeling of being an unwelcome member of the 'boys' club was also expressed by the head of School A, who finds herself outnumbered by male colleagues in her district by five to one. Although she recognised that research findings supported the argument that there were distinctly different experiences of headship according to gender, unlike her colleague in School B, she did not identify any significant disadvantages. Indeed she felt that her gender may actually have helped diffuse a number of potentially violent situations with aggressive parents. She could not detect, however, any resistance or difficulty with members of staff caused by her gender, a position that was in contrast to the experiences of the head of School B who inherited the school from a 'loveable' patriarch:

Its interesting here because there are a few male, middle aged teachers who enjoyed very much working with the previous [male] head, who now find it extraordinarily difficult. I find there is a group of male middle managers in particular who don't want the responsibilities [of decision making] and who certainly find it very difficult for a woman to be pointing that out and moving them on. However female the management style is, however feminine the management style is in terms of working from their strengths and encouraging them, working through dialogue and so forth rather than through diktat, I think they would rather I said: "Look, sort this out. Raise the student grades by 5 per cent and if you don't I'll sack you". I think they much prefer if I came in like that rather than sitting them down and saying "How are we going to get things moving in your department?" "What support do you need?" "Well I'm a man, I don't need support." Its working with middle managers that's where the difference is most marked.

Her strategy in these instances was to take the pressure off by getting "really difficult" men to work with one other male deputy headteachers, rather than herself, as long as the job got done. This, she felt, allowed the same issues to be confronted, but in an environment where the man has a chance of winning. It has

to be deemed a wise move for it is easy to form the impression that in a confrontation with her, the 'men' would be beaten before they started.

CONCLUSION

The headteachers in this study have the twin difficulty of leading a self-managing school and of operating within a changing society that no longer exhibits all the attributes formerly associated with the notion of being English. The move to individuality in Britain over the last 20 years can be recognised in responses to authority which signal a more self-centred attitude than that traditionally attributed to this island race. Greater amounts of litigation are evident, for example, as citizens seek their 'rights' in a nation which does not have them enshrined in the constitution and schools report increasing numbers of negative parental responses to school rules and procedures. This breakdown of the corporate society exposes headteachers to increasingly isolated positions as they strive to maintain the values of inclusion, equity and justice that seemed to be the norm of previous generations.

This sense of isolation has been exacerbated by the continued lack of resources for schools, coupled with the tensions caused by the 'confusion' over lines of accountability for the headteachers who run the risk of being caught between their governing bodies and their employers. There is even a case for pointing to the lack of effective mechanisms for dealing with underperforming staff as a further reason for feeling that they are very much on their own. The findings from this study indicate that the constant struggle to raise standards without the proper infrastructure, and whilst running a contracting budget, places the headteacher in an invidious position. Legally charged with only day to day responsibility for the school, they are nevertheless all too often held solely accountable for school outcomes. These conditions provide the perfect conditions for uneasiness amongst headteachers and certainly militate against risk taking. It is a tribute to the subjects of this study that they retain a sense of reason and dignity in their

work that manifests itself in a calm, measured response to the variety of issues they face on a daily basis, particularly when we take account of the fact that there is no program of preparation for this difficult and highly political role.

Their success to this extent can perhaps be judged in part as a product of the national culture, not the one seemingly present in mainstream society today, but the one shaped by the tenets of previous generations. There is a resilience evident in their behaviour which can be aligned to the notions of a sense of duty and tolerance referred to in the introduction, a response to difficulty that almost amounts to stoicism when it comes to dealing with the consequences of under resourcing and the lack of a proper infrastructure. These attributes, coupled with a sense of humour and the very English notion of 'fair play', means that they are able to deal with staff and pupils in an even handed manner and maintain their sense of proportion when faced with difficult situations.

The net impact of national culture on the headteachers in this study can thus be seen as one that has helped in equipping them to be personally resourceful, flexible and ultimately successful in steering their school through the uncharted waters created by a system lacking clarity in so many areas. The fact that they appear to be successful in their role is a tribute to their ability to interpret the reality of the social fabric and disassociate it from the rhetoric of society. They have the capacity to make the best of a bad situation and turn seemingly impossible situations to the advantage of the school. In part this is achieved through a willingness to exploit the gaps in the system, but it is also largely due to high levels of confidence in their own ability. This is not so much the 'ineffable sense of superiority' that so incensed the 15th Century Venetian ambassador, but more as a result of their maturity in role. English society has a longevity and history which breeds high levels of self-confidence, which undoubtedly contributes to the healthy mental state of this study group, but their equanimity is probably more as a result of their experience and the growing realisation that things can never get so bad as

to totally faze them. Certainly beginning headteachers do not have this level of confidence and are more prone to self-doubt and consequent inaction (Male and Daresh, 1997). The headteachers in this study, however, appear to base their confidence more on their experience and expertise than on their 'Englishness'. In essence, therefore, they are as much 'made' as 'born'.

In achieving this position they have demonstrated personal attributes that sets them apart from the rest of the teaching force. They have wisdom, foresight and vision in abundance. They have the levels of experience, expertise and flexibility necessary to succeed in this complex role. Finally they have the analytical skills, competence and confidence that allows them to live out their philosophies in their leadership role. They are each unique, but, at the same time, the products of a system. In short, 'made in England', but finished in the school of life.

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